



## Aesthetic Experience and Critical Reflection Democratic Potentials of Artistic Interventions in Urban Public Space

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The aim of this paper is to develop a critical theoretical framework for the general interrogation of the interrelationship between artistic interventions in public space and democracy. The basic thesis guiding the following argument is that the main challenge for contemporary democracy and democratic citizenship consists in combining the recognition of difference and conflict with the reflection of the common good of society. And the question in focus will be on what terms aesthetic experience is able to contribute to establishing this combination.

### 1 - Public space and public discourse

As a starting point, a conceptual distinction is suggested between *public space* as a purely descriptive term and *public discourse* as a term with normative implications – thus attempting to avoid the potential confusion of descriptive and normative notions that seems to be inherent in the widely used term ‘public sphere’ (Nielsen). In other words, *public space* is understood as a general societal field of practice that is in principle commonly accessible (in contrast to private spaces of practice); it functions as forum for collective formation of experience and meaning; it is permeated by conflicts between the dynamics of the *market*, the *state*, and *civil society* (Cohen & Arato); and it serves as stage for ongoing struggles between the multiplicity of agents engaging in social practice. In this sense, public space is an overall term that includes physical space, mass media space, and social media space.

*Public discourse*, conversely, is defined as a specific, normative mode of processing conflicts and collective experience in public space. The processing unfolds with a view to democracy and the notion of the common good of society. In other words, public discourse is the mode of public opinion formation, empowerment of

citizens, and democratic political action. The existence of a significant public discourse is not guaranteed: It must continuously be established and maintained by civil society agents through struggles in public space. Public discourse comes in two versions that are partly conflicting: on the one hand, the overall, universally reasoning public discourse ‘from above’ that represents the established principles of public interaction in the political institutions and the mass media (Habermas, 1989); and on the other hand, the decentralized, subjective experience-reflecting public discourse in which institutionally not represented interests, marginalized popular needs and everyday life concerns ‘from below’ manifest themselves and struggle to gain attention and priority in the political process (Negt & Kluge; Nielsen).

### 2 - Differentiation and conflictual interplay

Modernity, i.e. the complex socio-cultural formation that gradually and with considerable national and regional variations developed in parts of Europe and North America from around 1750, has in established sociological theory been characterized as a functionally differentiated societal formation (Habermas, 1984; Luhmann; Bourdieu; Laclau & Mouffe).

An important addition to this general characterization would be that the basic principle of differentiation of a plurality of discursive forms and domains of practice (economy, politics, science, art, religion etc.) represents only half the picture: the differentiated discursive forms and domains are as an equally basic principle involved in an ongoing conflictual interplay. Furthermore, in modern social practice the balance between these conflicting discourses is crucial for the character of the society in question. An equilibrium between struggling discourses may lead to productive reciprocal conditioning and dynamization whereas an unbalanced relationship is liable to facilitate a hegemonic constellation in which one discourse dominates another thus making it difficult or even impossible for the dominated discursive practice to unfold and create meaning on its own terms. This question of balance depends on societal power relations (political, economic, institutional, cultural) and is historically variable (Nielsen).

In the following, we will focus on the interrelationship between political and aesthetic discursive practices. Political discursive practice is characterized by directedness. Ideal-typically, it provides social agents with orientation in their struggle to determine the distribution of resources and life opportunities and to close the societal formation of meaning on their own terms. However, on democratic conditions this basic power orientation of political practice is faced with the necessity of compromising and acknowledging common societal concerns and universally obligating principles of legitimacy.

In contrast, aesthetic discursive practice is non-directed by nature: its purpose is inherent. It challenges established formations of meaning, but indeterminately, without prescribing edifying alternatives (Bubner). Aesthetic practice holds a potential for creating an empowering interplay between senses, emotions, and intellect and for stimulating a universal perspective of reflection – but may also remain limited to the horizon of private sensuous-emotional experience.

The terms *aestheticization* and *politicization* concern the expansion of aesthetic or political discursive principles to other discursive domains or to the sociocultural context as a whole. As pointed out above, such expansive tendencies and associated discursive struggles are ongoing processes in modern society, but the balance between the involved discourses is crucial: does it allow mutual stimulation and relative autonomy – or does one discourse colonize the other? And furthermore: what type of aesthetic or political discourse is at stake? The following argument will present some important distinctions in the field of aesthetic practice and then return to political practice and different forms of interplay between aesthetic and political practice at the end of the chapter.

### 3 - The characteristics and potentials of aesthetic experience

Drawing on Immanuel Kant (Kant), we can distinguish between three types of aesthetic practice: 1) *the aesthetics of the agreeable* which does not hold a high ranking in the philosophy of Kant, since it is limited to the question of immediate sensuous and emotional pleasure and operates in the mode of private, idiosyncratic judgement, 2) *the aesthetic judgment of taste* which is the main category in Kant's aesthetics. It is characterized by transcending private preferences by reflecting aesthetic experiences in relation to the notion of *sensus communis*, 3) *the aesthetics of the sublime* which conceptualizes an ambivalent feeling, a joy mixed with horror due to loss of control. Subsequently, the ambivalence is processed by way of reason and, if the operation is successful, orientation is regained on new terms with a view to universal obligation and common concerns.

Furthermore, Kant distinguishes between two modes of judgement: *Determinative judgement* that immediately subsumes the specific under an existing universal concept, thus merely affirming what we believe to know already or what we are used to regard as sources of sensuous and emotional pleasure. And *reflective judgement* that grants the unique qualities of the specific precedence over existing universal concepts. It conducts an unceasing movement of investigation

between an object that cannot be fully determined and a universal concept that cannot be found (Bubner 34 ff.). This movement of investigation potentially expands our sensuous, emotional, and cognitive knowledge of the world.

Reflective judgement constitutes the mode of *aesthetic experience* which, in the Kantian sense, represents a dialogical process that combines sensuous, emotional, and intellectual capacities of the subject in reflecting experiential encounters with artefacts, aestheticized spaces, and social relations under the universal perspective of *sensus communis*. The aesthetic characteristics of the object do not *determine* the exchange, but they represent a dynamic framing condition for the process of experience formation and for developing critical reflection and competent agency. In the shape of both the aesthetic judgement of taste and the sublime feeling the process of aesthetic experience unfolds as the unceasing investigative movement of reflective judgement, and as its specific critical and emancipatory potential it sets us free without determining what for (Bubner 92).

#### 4 - Art's critical potential in public space

If artworks are to facilitate aesthetic experience in the Kantian sense, they are required to confront the public with questions, not pre-given answers (Kyndrup). This may imply disturbing established formations of meaning, encouraging non-directed critical reflection, creating ambiguity and making conflicts visible, offering open spaces for dialogue and critical participation – and on that basis contributing to the development of public discourse and democratic citizenship. In this sense, the critical potential of art is to challenge the public to sense, feel, and reflect freely and independently.

Urban public space hosts a variety of aesthetic interventions some of which are artworks while others are of a different nature. We can distinguish between:

- Formal artistic expressions (artworks, including architecture, with a purely aesthetic frame of reference)
- Affirmative aestheticizing interventions (harmonizing, commercially or politically framed aesthetic appeals to private sensuous and emotional pleasure; celebrations

of established power figures; staging of official interpretations of common historical experience [Baßler & Drügh; Ullrich])

- Critical interventions (the avantgardistic, anti-institutional tradition, including relational aesthetics; street art/graffiti as subcultural positioning and reappropriation of urban space; aesthetic expressions with a monological, power-oriented political agenda; artistic interventions provoking critical reflection and dialogue [Bürger; Bourriaud; Kester; Horn; Misik])

Critical aesthetic interventions are always to some extent socio-politically reflected, but their potential in terms of empowerment of citizens differs according to the status they grant the aesthetic discourse. Many critical interventions are power-oriented: they aim to promote specific agendas and interests, thereby limiting the aesthetic discourse to a tool and submitting it to the directed rationale of political discourse and the principles of determinative judgement. This type of intervention does not represent a possibility for creating new, experience-based insights, but merely serves as an aesthetic affirmation of the established worldview of the agents. It is frequently practiced by political parties, social movements, creative activists, and certain types of political art, and its public manifestations tend to be monological and to primarily address the already agreeing sympathizers (Duncombe & Lambert; Jelinek; Rauterberg).

It should be stressed that this characterization does not question the legitimacy nor the justification of this type of intervention. In a public space where aestheticization forms the general terms of communication and interaction, an emphatic aesthetic expression remains the precondition for obtaining visibility and thereby for being able to assert oneself in the struggle for attention and influence. Outwardly, power-oriented aesthetic interventions serve as manifestations of interests and needs in society and inwardly they offer a common identity as a frame of orientation and a perspective of community.

These are all essential elements of a democratic political process that should not be neglected. But in the present

context the point is that these forms of practice do not let the potentials of the aesthetic and the political discourse, respectively, unfold in a mutually enriching interplay, but merely utilize the aesthetic discourse as an instrument for the political. In this constellation, the democratic political process is deprived of the special resource with which the aesthetic discourse would have been able to contribute by potentially encouraging citizens to reflect critically on the basis of their own and common experiences and possibly reach new, valuable insights – without on beforehand prescribing them what they should end up thinking and doing. Emphatic democratic empowerment, we might term this perspective of possibility.

### 5 - Artistic interventions

Realizing this potential implies *artistic interventions* understood as indeterminate, not power-oriented challenges of established formations of meaning in public space. This type of intervention unfolds the specific characteristics of the aesthetic discourse by way of activating the reflective judgement and thereby potentially inspiring open dialogue and possible qualification of the political discourse (Negt). The critically reflecting citizen is the implicit addressee of this type of intervention.

To be sure, in this definition artistic interventions are not exclusively reserved for artists – they can also be practiced by political activists, social movements, and engaged citizens in general. But artists have special qualifications in this regard due to art's status as a specific civil society agent with aesthetic practice as field of expertise and with the form tradition of art as prop room. Artistic interventions operate in the shape of artefacts or mediated invitations for making aesthetic experience in the mode of the aesthetic judgement of taste or in the shape of creating overwhelming, inescapable social processes of experience in the mode of the aesthetics of the sublime. In the following, an illustrative example of each of these types of intervention is presented.

For the international exhibition of contemporary art *documenta 14* that took place in Athens and Kassel in 2017, the Nigerian-American artist Olu Oguibe had

created a 16,2 meters tall monument that was given a prominent position in the central square *Königsplatz* in Kassel. The monument was titled *The Strangers and Refugees Monument* and was formed as an obelisk. On the four sides of the obelisk, the same quotation from the Gospel of Matthew (25:35) was engraved in, respectively, English, German, Arabic, and Turkish – in the English version: “I was a stranger and you took me in”.

The work intervened in the highly tensed political debate on the European refugee crisis that had unfolded since 2015, but the intervention was neither an unequivocal interpretation of the complex matter of increasing numbers of refugees nor a party submission in the political debate. Instead, it opened an aesthetic space for the indeterminate seeking movement of reflective judgement between the concrete political challenges and a general, consensual ethics of love for fellow humans.

This aesthetic space is first of all established by way of the obelisk as a universally acknowledged, classically beautiful, harmonic monumental form with roots in cultural history reaching back to ancient Egypt. This traditional, intercultural form frames an aesthetic practice in which the public is invited to experience the work in the mode of the aesthetic judgement of taste, i.e. the feeling of disinterested pleasure with reference to the notion of a common sense for beauty: a *sensus communis*. The universal perspective in this process of aesthetic experience is further supported by the elevated status of the biblical text and its general humanistic appeal which evokes an unconditional relationship of human reciprocity between the universal entities ‘I’ and ‘you’.

In a sociopolitical context, the ‘disinterested pleasure’ that according to Kant characterizes the aesthetic judgement of taste does not imply that the judgement of taste completely neglects the conflicts of interest that propel the political process. Disinterested pleasure means that the judgement of taste liberates itself from the immediate association with specific interests, inclinations, and desires and reflects the conflicts on a

universal level. In the mode of the judgement of taste, in other words, the process of aesthetic experience does not take side in concrete conflicts of interest, nor is it directed towards concrete problem solving. Instead, the usual political reflection of these conflicts is challenged to legitimize itself in a universal perspective, and in this manner the political discursive practice is potentially embarked on the inexhaustible, ambivalent seeking process of aesthetic experience between the level of special interests ('we have neither the space nor the resources for more refugees here') and the level of universal, consensual ethics ('anyone who is in need must be helped').

An example of an artistic intervention in the mode of the aesthetics of the sublime is the strategic concept *Anger Marketing* that has been developed by the American activist duo The Yes Men. The aim of the concept is to encourage the public to reflect critically on general problems of society by initially placing them in a concrete social situation that makes them mad. In accordance with this general idea, The Yes Men's intervention at Roskilde Festival in 2016 aimed to create critical reflection on the general issue of surveillance as it is presently unfolding in society at large, but as a stumbling block the activists pretended to address merely a local issue at the festival. On large billboards on the festival area, the allegedly official data policy of the festival was presented: All internet traffic on the festival area would be monitored, and all digital data, including text messages and phone calls, would be hoarded, stored, and shared with external partners. Furthermore, drones and video cameras would collect data on activities in physical space.

The intervention initially overwhelmed the public and triggered the state of loss of control that potentially results in the sublime feeling in the Kantian sense. Correspondingly, the spontaneous, highly affective reaction among the participants at the festival was that this represented no less than a scandal that fundamentally ruined their trust in the festival management. This was expressed both in the shape of protests in the physical space of the festival and in shape of a considerable shitstorm on social media.

As a next step, the intervention aimed to process the overwhelming collective experience of abuse – e.g. by way of an office where the public could make complaints regarding the data policy and were given unexpected answers from a comedian disguised as an official spokesperson of the festival; furthermore, by way of a performance that presented itself as a debate thus operating on unclear and confusing premises. Finally, the intervention culminated in a cognitively and ethically reasoning dialogue, transmitted via satellite, with the American whistleblower Edward Snowden.

During this process of experience that appealed intensely to the reflective judgement, the public gradually realized that the alleged data policy of the festival was a fiction, but that this type of surveillance in reality is practiced all the time and everywhere by private companies and governments (Shoshana Zuboff). The aesthetic intervention in the delimited context of the festival made this incalculable, general issue tangible and visual – and thereby accessible to critical reflection and to a possible commitment for change.

Each in its own way, these two examples point out the specific political potential that characterizes aesthetic experience when it is able to unfold on its own aesthetic premises: It organizes experience-based – sensuous, emotional, and intellectual – resistance in the shape of critical reflection, but without pre-determining the conclusions of the critique. The perspective is an open and more complex horizon of reflection and potentially a more comprehensive empowerment of citizens than a merely political-discursive practice of resistance would be able to accomplish.

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